**THE GREAT REVERSAL**
**2. THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD**
**June 24, 2001**

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**Luke 8:26-39**
**Galatians 3:23-29**
**"There is no longer Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free; . . . male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)**

***Dear God, show us again the mystery of your love—which comes to each of us regardless of who we are, or what names we use to describe ourselves, or what others call us, or what we believe, or even what we have done. Startle us, O God, with that good news and speak your word to us; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

In his recent book, *An Hour Before Daylight,* former president Jimmy Carter reflects on his childhood in rural Georgia and his relationship with his parents and his brother, Billy, who became a very familiar personality during the Carter presidency.

He writes: "Mama always said that Billy was the smartest of her children, and none of us argued with her.

When the international news media moved into Plains, Georgia, during the 1976 presidential campaign, Billy became the center of attention. Carter remembers,

> He drank more, talked more, and saw his deliberately outrageous statements quoted as serious comments. He was always good for a delightful quote. When one of the reporters remarked that Billy was a little strange, he replied: "Look, my mama was a seventy-year-old Peace Corps volunteer in India, one of my sisters goes all over the world as a holy-roller preacher, my oldest sister spends half her time on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and my brother thinks he's going to be President of the United States. Which one of our family do *you* think is normal?"

I loved Carter's memory of a well-publicized incident that happened on inauguration day.

> After I was inaugurated and we walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, our family left the reviewing stand and moved toward the White House for our first visit. Not surprisingly we were surrounded by reporters. . . . The first question was directed to Mama. "Miss Lillian, aren't you proud of your son?" As the TV cameras focused on her I waited for her congratulatory words, but Mama answered tartly, "Which one?"

The contrast between the two sons was clear and made great news copy: bright, focused, proper, Annapolis graduate, nuclear submarine officer, successful farmer, governor—and hard drinking,

irreverent, seemingly unfocused, not-so-proper, slightly bizarre, good ole boy. But those distinctions—which the world is quick to make, which in a sense represent the way life is organized in this world—have no meaning at all to a mother who loves each son equally and deeply. Her love is one love. It does not take into account any of the criteria and categories the world uses. And there is something in that of the gospel of Jesus Christ: the love of God given to each and all, the amazing grace of God.

Two thousand years ago, a quiet revolution began in a remote province of the Roman Empire. It was a revolution of grace that essentially destroyed the categories, boundaries, and hierarchies by which human societies are organized. The basis of this revolution of grace was the amazing and radical notion that in Jesus Christ all the ideas of rank and privilege disappear because we are all one, all sons and daughters of a God who loves us all, each and everyone of us. It is a deceptively simple idea, but in the entire history of human ideas, none is more powerfully revolutionary. In Christ we are one.

In the society in which he was born and the revolution of grace began, there were plenty of divisions and boundaries and ways to categorize people. In fact, boundaries defined who a person was and how he or she lived. The boundary of race, for instance. God had chosen a people and gave them a law and in obeying that law—adhering to its statutes, its dietary restrictions, its distinctions between what is clean and what is unclean—God's people knew who they were. It enabled them to survive as a people down across the centuries.

Jesus of Nazareth, however, taught and lived in a way that ignored those boundaries. The way Luke tells the story, Jesus didn't seem to know or care about the boundary between clean and unclean, male and female—even the basic boundary between Jew and Gentile.

In the incident we heard this morning, Jesus is walking through Gentile territory—you can be sure of that because of the herd of pigs feeding. He encounters a demented man, restores him to health, his demons enter the herd of pigs—which plunge headlong over a cliff to their deaths. Jesus tells the man to go home, to tell his Gentile people what has happened. The man's family and friends see him restored, sane, now fully clothed, talking sense, see the dead pigs, and are not awed by it all, or grateful, but afraid. And, one assumes, a little angry at the capital loss. Restoration, healing, can be a costly business, apparently.

That story must have traveled like wildfire throughout Galilee. In the context of that time and place, it was powerfully revolutionary. Jesus changes things, basic things. Jesus heals people whom human society doesn't know what to do with. Jesus restores to the community marginalized people the community has discarded. Jesus treats Jews and Gentiles the same: with compassion, justice, and love. No one gets preferential treatment. No one is left out on the basis of race or religion, or even the quality of their morality or the orthodoxy of their theology. Apparently Jesus can't see or doesn't care about the obvious differences, the boundaries so carefully assembled by hundreds of years of religious and social custom.

Later, as his followers told the story everywhere they went, the sociological and communal implications of the message continued to be a source of controversy and conflict. The first

missionary to the Gentiles, Paul, traveled extensively outside the old boundaries of Israel and Judah, north, up into Galatia, modern Turkey, told the story of Jesus and organized little communities of believers—called churches. The new believers were Gentiles, or Greeks, as Paul calls them. All the original believers were Jewish. Some church leaders in Jerusalem thought Paul was making a big mistake including Gentiles, i.e., destroying the most important category of meaning in their lives. Paul must be forgetting who he is. So they sent teams of teachers up into Galatia to visit those little communities of new believers and they said, "Paul neglected to tell you something. If you want to be Christians you must obey the Law of Moses, the dietary restrictions, the feast days, the cleanliness/holiness code, and your men must be circumcised." The Galatian Christians didn't know what to think. Paul had told them that, in Jesus Christ, God loved them and that they were saved by that grace, no strings attached, no conditions. God loved all people equally and Christ had come for all. It was very good news. Too good to be true, perhaps. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to do what these teachers were recommending—follow a few dietary restrictions, observe fasts and feasts—just for insurance purposes.

When Paul heard what was happening, he was livid, and the New Testament Letter of Paul to the Galatians is the result. "You are saved by faith, not works," he told them. It is an amazing grace. And when you know how deeply you are loved by God—how in Jesus Christ, God has adopted you as son or daughter—you actually become a new person, you come up out of the waters of your baptism a child of God. You have a new identity—the old identity categories are gone now. "In Christ," he said, "there is no more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female."

That's revolutionary. Those are the three basic anthropological divisions that organized the world. The religion of Jesus' day was based on clear boundaries between God's people and the rest of the world. A faithful Jew had as little to do with others as possible; didn't associate with, certainly didn't eat with, Gentiles.

In Christ there is no Jew, no Greek, Paul said. There goes the neighborhood. No slave and free—the basic economic boundary between rich and poor, haves and have-nots. Without that, how will you know who to let in the country club or fraternity?

And no male, no female. That undercuts the very basis of society. "Women were not treated as fully persons. They were for the most part considered as property, as part of a man's possession. . . .Women had few rights. A husband could divorce her at will; she could not divorce him at all." (See Isabel Rogers, *Introduction to Feminist Theology.*)

"No male nor female"? Every Jewish man daily offered a prayer of gratitude that God had not made him a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Paul, a good Pharisee, prayed that prayer every day of his life, until Jesus Christ changed him. But here—and perhaps it was the clarifying, distilling power of his anger—he rises to the occasion and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ with its full implications: social, economic, political, and personal:

> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.

That is still radical and revolutionary. It took 1,863 years for Western civilization to finally rid itself of slavery. It took that long for the followers of Jesus to begin to question and then change the way women were regarded, not just in society but in the church itself. The two largest religious groups in this country—the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Church—continue to act as if Paul never said what he said. Slowly, but surely, the boundary is dissolving, but it has taken a very long time.

And the boundary of religion and race? No more Jew or Greek? Religion and race and ethnicity continue to divide the human family, everywhere, it seems. The newspaper last week reported on ethnic violence on every page, it seemed. In Israel and Palestine, in China, the Sudan, Bosnia, in Zaire, the Ukraine. The fragile peace in Northern Ireland is threatened today as the IRA refuses to disarm and Protestants prepare to repeat again their offensive, belligerent marches through Catholic neighborhoods.

In Christ there is no Jew or Greek. Reformed theologian Philip Yancey writes,

> In this day when tribalism sparks massacres in Africa, when nations redraw boundaries based on ethnic background, when racism in the United States mocks our nation's great ideals, when minorities and splinter groups lobby for their rights, I know of no more powerful message of the gospel than this, the message that got Jesus killed. The walls separating us from each other, and from God, have been demolished. (*What's So Amazing about Grace?* p. 155)

The radical message of Christianity is that in Jesus Christ all the boundaries we employ to define rank and privilege and keep other people in place, all the structures by which human societies define who is in and who is out, have been destroyed. We live in a kingdom in which there are no distinctions, in which each is dignified—not by race, gender, or wealth, but by God's love shown in Jesus Christ.

All the barriers are gone in Christ, even the barrier between the divine and the human, between God and ourselves. And that, finally, is the key. This is not finally a new social theory or political five-year plan. It is finally about God and humanity, about God and you, if you will.

Paul couldn't get over what happened to himself, how God had literally grabbed hold of him, knocked him down, changed absolutely the way he thought and the way he lived, changed him so absolutely that all Paul could do was confess, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." Here he was—strict Pharisee—embracing Gentiles, pray-er of the prayer thanking God that he wasn't a woman, saying, "In Christ there is no male or female."

The way Paul saw it, he was a new man, his old identity was gone. He was now a newborn child of God, in Christ—adopted by God as God's own child. And that is the word here. In Jesus Christ God has adopted us.

No matter how alienated from God and others we feel, no matter how we feel marginalized and unacceptable and unclean—in Christ, we are God's child.

Yale Biblical scholar David Bartlett, in a fine essay on Galatians, tells the poignant story of

> friends who have adopted four children and had one biological child as well—Sam. Sam's younger adopted brother is Mark. At an appropriate age, the parents explained to each adopted child how he or she was chosen and how deeply he or she is cherished and loved. After Mark had heard the wonderful story of how his parents had chosen him and how they wanted him and how deeply they loved him and were grateful for him—and how his story and his arrival in the family was different from Sam's, the biological son, he said, "Gosh, that's wonderful! Can't we adopt Sam, too?"

Paul couldn't get over it: how God had cut through all the ways Paul was so desperately trying to do the right thing and please God and set him gloriously free from all that, by showing him that in Jesus Christ God already loved him, adopted him already as a son of God, and, furthermore, loved everybody. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one. It was the most amazing grace, and Paul lived out his life—died as a martyr in Rome—joyfully thanking and praising God. And somewhere along the line, I suppose, he gave up thanking God that he wasn't a Gentile, slave, or a woman and started to praise God for the new way of thinking and being, the new life he had been given.

From the beginning, it has been about transformation. From the very beginning, when he walked through Galilee touching the lives of the outcasts, the sick and old, the children, the blind and crippled—it has been about change, conversion, newness. From the beginning, it has been about accepting his love and living in that love and trusting that love with life—possession and hopes and dreams and with whatever time we have left.

It is always risky, of course—that decision to let go of the old ways and trust him. But there is something in each of us, I believe, that longs for that newness, that amazing grace, that new beginning. It is why we are so deeply touched by the old hymn *Amazing Grace:*

> Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> Was blind, but now I see.

James Autry is a corporate CEO, President of Meredith Corporation, which publishes *Better Homes and Gardens.* He is also a poet, the son of a Baptist minister, who often writes about church and religion in the Mississippi of his childhood. St. Paul said about new life, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

Listen to James Autry's poem about a country baptism in the river.

> Baptism
>
> There's something about this,

about putting the people under the water
and raising them up
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
something that makes the people cry,
that makes them want to want
everything to be all right,
and makes them want to leave this place
and be better,
to immerse themselves in their lives
and somehow be washed clean
of all the things they think
they should not have done
and should not still want to do.
That's it.
Not the other stuff,
the star in the east,
the treasures in heaven,
or any of the old stories.
Not even life after death.
It is only to be new again.

(James A. Autry, "Baptism," in *Life After Mississippi*)

To be new again.

In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.